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ABSTRACT

The Virginia Department of Education is developing a plan that would require all students to complete a common core of learning with outcomes based on seven dimensions of living. Students successfully completing a statewide assessment of critical knowledge and skills by the end of 10th grade would continue their education by choosing one of three tracks: college preparatory, technical preparatory, or apprenticeship. The plan's focus on sorting high school students into programs to prepare for college or work is short sighted, elitist, and deleterious. Implementation of the proposed plan could further intensify the sorting mechanisms now praticed in Virginia's public schools and stigmatize and injure educationally disadvantaged students. The proposed plan is also based on the erroneous assumption that 16-year-old students have the maturity to select a specific course of action that will determine their future career. Although the plan advocates that students should not be "locked in" to a single option, lateral moves between the proposed options would be extremely difficult for students in reality. To prepare a well-qualified work force for the 21st century, all young people who graduate from high schools should be prepared with the occupational skills for work as well as the basic skills needed to continue their education to function successfully in a global society. (YLB)

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"WORLD CLASS" OR "SOCIAL CLASS"

WHAT KIND OF WORKFORCE PREPARATION WILL WE HAVE?

A PRESENTATION GIVEN AT A

SYMPOSIUM ON AMERICA'S CHOICE: HIGH SKILLS OR LOW WAGES -

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

DURING THE AMERICAN VOCATIONAL ASSOCIATION

HELD AT

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 1992

BY

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"World Class" or "Social Class": What Kind of Workforce Preparation Will We Have?

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Remaining competitive in a global marketplace is a major challenge facing this nation. Survival of American companies, both large and small, is dependent upon the availability of a well trained and productive workforce. In recent years, concerns have been expressed by corporate leaders and public officials about how well the American educational system is preparing young people for the workforce of the future. Several national commissions and state task forces have developed proposals that address issues of concern dealing with preparing an educated workforce. In Virginia, a well educated workforce is also an issue of vital concern to our citizens.

An advisory committee appointed by the Governor has proposed a plan based upon the America's Choice report for a "world class" system to prepare a "competitive workforce of the 21st century." The plan now being developed by the Virginia Department of Educaion would require all students to complete a common core of learning wtih outcomes based on seven dimensions of living. By the end of the tenth grade all students would achieve an educational performance standard of excellence, as measured by a state wide assessment of critical knowledge and skills. Students successfully completing the assessment would continue their education by choosing one of three tracks: college preparatory, technical preparatory, or apprenticeship. Those students who do not pass the assessment of critical knowledge and skills would attend a proposed youth work-learning center and develop the competencies needed to meet the assessment standards as well as spending half or more of their week in paid employment and job training activities.

Although the proposed plan has the virtuous goal of assuring that all students acquire the competencies needed to successfully complete the assessment of critical skills and knowledge, the plan's focus on sorting high school students into programs to prepare for college or preparation for work is, I believe, short-sighted, elitist, and deleterious.

I am concerned that implementation of the proposed plan will further intensify the sorting mechanisms now practiced in the public schools of Virginia, and will further stigmatize and injure groups of students already disadvantaged in the quality of education they receive. Differentiating the curriculum in this rigid manner manifests itself in an insidious tracking system which further perpetuates the placement of low socioeconomic students into lower track classes. This approach will not deliver the skills and knowledge that are required for a highly skilled and productive workforce. The workforce of the future will become more diverse and will be composed of individuals from various socioeconomic groups in our society. Policies of the past ten years have bifurcated the American society into a widening gap between the rich and the poor. During this same period of time American business and industry have been moving rapidly toward a total quality management approach which relies heavily on team building, and on-time, problem solving approaches to the production of goods and services. The sorting of young people at the end of a prescribed curriculum using a paper and pencil test into separate tracks is ironical when juxtaposed with the reality and practices of the workplace in which adults from all socioeconomic and educational levels work as peers in team efforts in an on-going quality control approach to remain competitive in a global market place. Contemporary practices in business and industry using the Deming concept to quality control do not wait until the end of the production of a service or product to check quality, and I am perplexed by advocacy for a testing system that is singular, and terminal in its approach rather than one that utilizes multiple checks for diagnostic and prescriptive purposes.

The proposed plan is also based on the assumption that sixteen year old students have the maturity to select a specific course of action that will determine their career for the future. Experience with young people as parents or teachers obviously indicates that this is a false

assumption. Anecdotal and empirical evidence clearly indicate that career maturation is a complex, continuous, developmental task that precludes any definitive decisions that might be forced upon young people at an early age.

Young people do need to begin making curricular decisions in order to attain their future career goals. However, the proposed plan will force early student choices that are irrevocable. Although proposed plan advocates that students should not be "locked in" to a single option, it will be extremely difficult in reality for students to make lateral moves between the proposed options. High school students need curricular alternatives that are not rigid, ones that provide them with more than three choices in acquiring skills and knowledge for the workplace and continued education, whether that be employer based training or a 4 year baccalaureate program.

Approximately 50 percent of American high school graduates enroll in some type of higher education. Only about half of those who enroll in a four-year college or university complete a baccalaureate degree. An increasing number of students enrolled in four-year institutions of higher education are taking five to seven years to acquire their degrees. Mixing work and education is becoming more commonplace as the financial burdens of higher education continue to escalate.

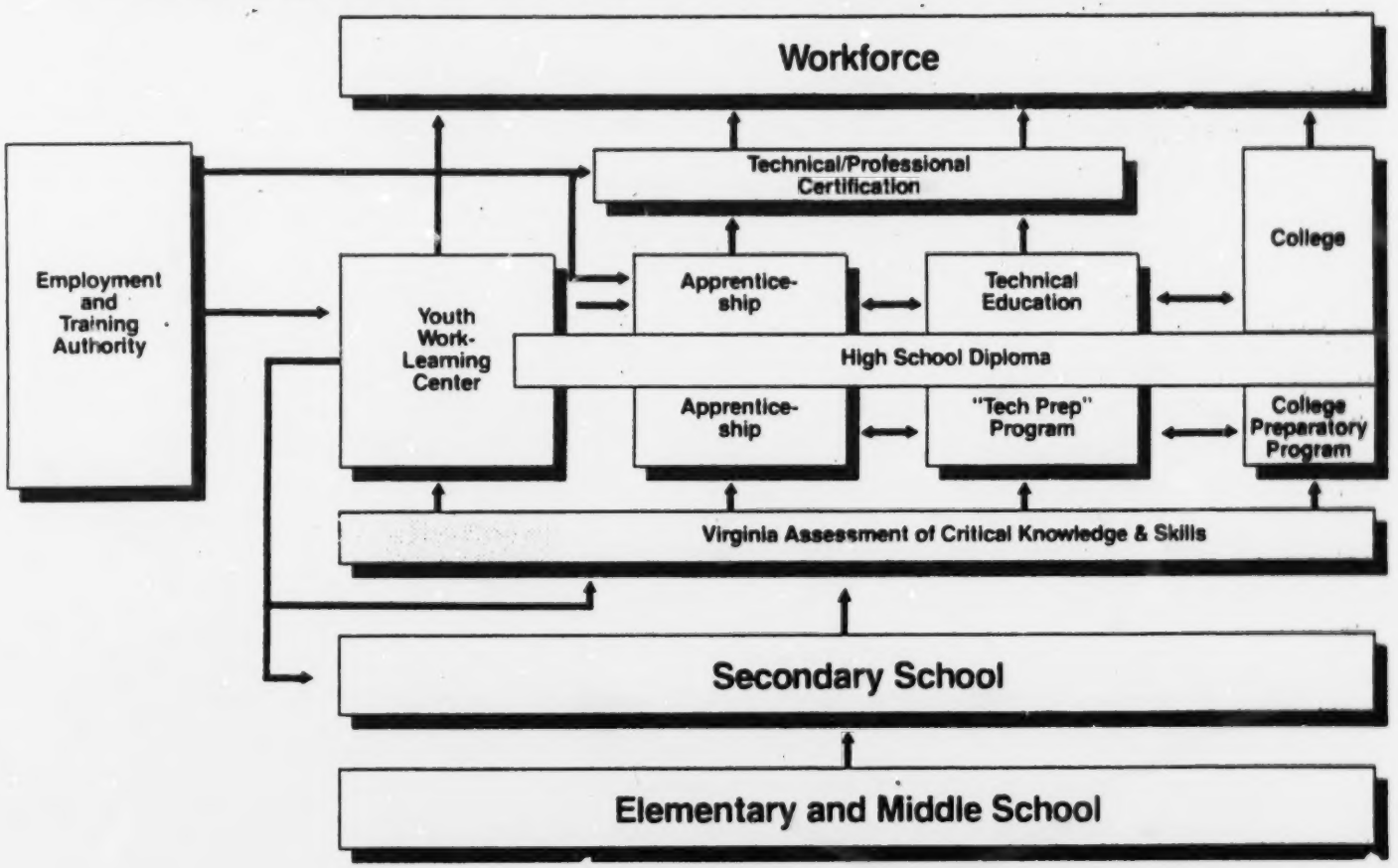
The proposed plan for strengthening the workforce of Virginia as well as this nation's contains serious flaws which need to be openly discussed and addressed if the public schools are to prepare young people to function successfully in our society. The members of the General Assembly in Virginia recognized these issues during their last session and modified the Standards of Quality for the public schools of Virginia. The standards, as now stated, require that local boards "shall develop and implement a program of instruction for grades K through 12 which emphasizes... knowledge and skills needed to qualify for further education or employment..."

If we are is to prepare a well qualified workforce for the 21st century, a new paradigm is needed that will provide that all young people who graduate from our high schools have

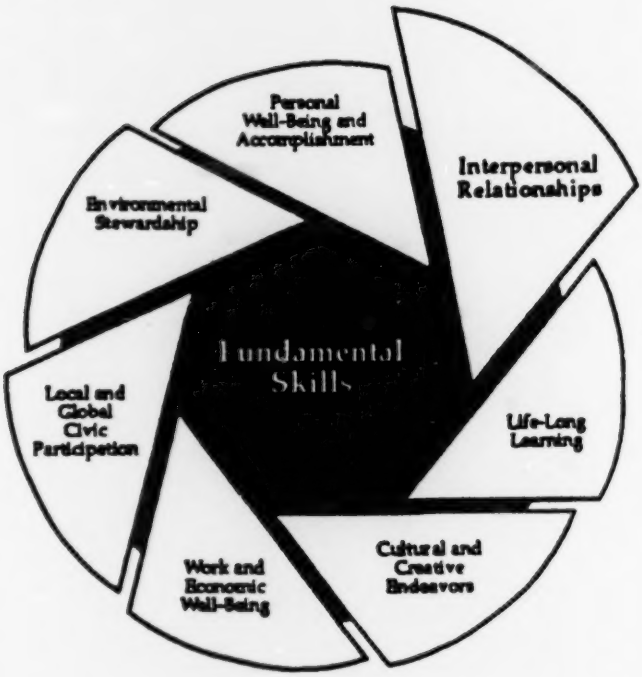
occupational skills for work as well as the basic skills needed to continue their education in order to function successfully in our global society. All students need basic skills. All students also need to acquire occupational skills before graduation from high school. If we are to have a society that is economically viable and socially interdependent, it behooves our educational policy makers throughout this nation to provide opportunities for all students to receive instruction that prepares them for employment and further educational opportunities. Anything less will lead to a "social class" rather than a "world class" system of education for young people in Virginia and across this nation.

The Virginia Plan for Strengthening the Commonwealth's 21st Century Workforce

Schematic Representation of Proposed Restructuring



Governor's Advisory Committee—Workforce Virginia 2000: A Partnership For Excellence



The Virginia Common Core of Learning

The Fundamental Skills